

FIRST DAY SHAVUOS 1994
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

On Shavuos we read about the giving of the Ten Commandments. We learn how the Jewish people were given the Ten Commandments by G-d, how Moshe Rabbeinu came down 40 days after Shavuos with the first tablets. However, these tablets were broken. They were not used by the Jewish people. It seems strange that the holiday of Shavuos should commemorate the first giving of the Ten Commandments. Why doesn't this holiday take place on Yom Kippur when the second tablets were brought down by Moshe Rabbeinu? These tablets endured and these tablets stayed with the Jewish people throughout the First Temple. It is true that Yom Kippur is the day of forgiveness because on this day the Jewish people were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf, but why do we celebrate on Shavuos the giving of the Torah when it seems that the Jewish people really did not accept the Torah and the Ten Commandments because just 40 days later they were worshipping the golden calf, so why isn't it that we should celebrate the giving of the Torah actually on Yom Kippur when the Jewish people really accepted the Torah, when they did not lapse anymore into worshipping the golden calf?

What's more, what happened to these fragments of the Ten Commandments? These fragments of the first Ten Commandments were not discarded but they were actually put in the Ark with the second whole Ten Commandments. They were gathered up and treated with reverence and respect. Perhaps we can understand then why we have Shavuos when we have because the Jewish people actually had not rejected the Torah and the Ten Commandments when they worshipped the golden calf; they had just taken a wrong path. They thought that they were actually fulfilling the Torah. It is true that they were new at this. They had just come out of Egypt and had to withstand the blandishments of the Egyptian culture and many of them had succumbed to the idolatry of Egypt, and they thought that they were just putting into practice the Ten Commandments when they worshipped the golden calf. It was a tragic mistake. It was a wrong turn, but, yet, the Jewish people still felt at that time that they were worshipping the golden calf.

We can understand this whole process if we understand that in the Torah no mention is made at all of the giving of the Torah. All that is mentioned about Shavuos is the bringing of the first fruits, the bringing of the two loaves of bread which were waved over the altar as well. We know that in Judaism we have to give 25% of our crop away in Temple times. Even before you paid taxes you had to give 2% to the poor, 2% to the Kohanim, another 10% to the Levites, another 10% either was brought up to Jerusalem or you gave it to the poor, depending upon which year it was in the cycle. You had to give the firstborn of your flocks. You had to give the first of your wool. You had to give challah. All told you probably had to give more than 25% of your crops and produce even before your taxes. The bikurim were an insignificant amount of money, but, yet, this bikurim required a great ceremony. A great ceremony took place when the Jewish people came up to Jerusalem with these first fruits. They were met with Chaleels and dignitaries and with oxen with golden horns, and there was a special prayer that was to be said that we learn in Ki Sove which is actually the basis of the Hagaddah. There was a big celebration when they brought the first fruits. Why should it be that there should be a big celebration when the Jewish people brought the first fruits when there was not even a brocha said when you gave away a lot of the other charity;, when you gave to the poor, when you gave the charity to Jerusalem and brought up the 10% there was no brocha that was even said, so why is it that there should be a brocha now? Why all this celebration?

Well, you can see that the reason why there had to be a celebration was to teach us that the Jewish people were making a new attempt to make things good and right, that they were bringing in the crop for the coming year, that there was a newness, a freshness. It was not just a repetition of the old cycle, that you could see the new and the beautiful in the new crops. This was just a beginning. It was not the end and there was no assurance that the crop would actually be brought in. After all, insects could invade, there could be floods, sudden storms which

could destroy the crops, hail, etc., that this was just the beginning of the process but we celebrated it because we knew that there was a lot of hard work ahead. There was a lot that still had to be done, but, yet, it was the beginning of the process. There are going to be many ups and downs in this process before the crop was actually going to be safely put away in the grainery.

The same thing is true with the Ten Commandments that were given. There were going to be many false starts. The Jewish people were going to have to learn how to apply these Ten Commandments in the proper way, but, yet, even though they failed many times the attempts to try to implement the Ten Commandments were to be recognized. Therefore, the fragments were not to be thrown away. Parenthetically, the rabbis say that the reason we do not make the brocha on giving charity is for two reasons. One reason is because, a humorous one, by the time a person made a brocha he may change his mind and not give the charity. Another reason is because giving charity is instinctively and intrinsically a holy act. We know that when we eat and we make a brocha we are changing a selfish act into a holy act because we are eating not just for ourselves but so that we can be strong to do mitzvahs. We know that when we make other brochas we are changing the status of something. When we make a brocha over the lulav we are changing a piece of wood, a stick, into a holy object. When we make a brocha before the Torah we are changing a book into a holy book. When we give charity we know that the very act of giving charity to the poor is, in itself, an act of holiness, so we do not need a brocha there. When the Jewish people were given the Ten Commandments they were starting a process. Just as when you brought in the first fruits you were starting a process which you have no way of knowing how it is going to end up.

That's why, too, this holiday is not called the holiday of Kabbalas Torah, of receiving the Torah. It is the holiday of the giving of the Torah, and we all know that

the Torah be given but people can be tuned out, just like a radio station has to constantly play its music and programs but it is not assured that people are going to listen. They have to also tune it. The Torah, too, was given but each of us has to tune in every day, and we have to tune in correctly. We have to tune in so we do not hear the static and do not misunderstand what is being said. The Jewish people at this particular time were told that they were to make an attempt to implement the Torah. There were going to be good days and bad days. There were going to be, as when you brought in the harvest, storms and there could also be insects and wars and things that could interfere with the harvest, but, yet, we had to persevere until eventually the harvest would be taken in. The same thing was true here, too. The Jewish people were told that they had to continue, that they had to persevere, that in spite of everything they were eventually going to overcome. There were going to be false starts. True, the Jewish people sinned at the golden calf but G-d forgave them. In fact, it is interesting to note that G-d did not forgive the Jewish people only once completely when they wandered the desert and that is when they gave up hope of going into the land of Israel, when they failed to fulfill the Jewish role of being the bearer of the Torah to all the nations of the world. They had to enter history and many of them did not want to enter history. They wanted to stay in the desert and erect walls around themselves and just sit and learn Torah, but we know that that is not the Jewish role. We know that if we enter history we are going to suffer great losses. The Jews, they entered Canaan and were attracted to Canaanite idol worship and so forth, but we know that that is our role, to try to make the Torah relevant to the world in which we live. It is not to make the Torah something good only for an ivory tower, for an academy. It is something that is supposed to be able to spread its influence throughout all life.

That is why we are taught that we have to honor all Jews, even Jews who have taken the wrong path. As long as they are still trying to implement the ideals of the

Torah they make take a wrong turn here and there, even a deadend, but, yet, they make an effort as we did when the first tablets were broken because of the sin of the golden calf, but, yet, they were still preserved these fragments and they were put into the Ark with the second whole tablets because there was a sincere effort to try. They were wrong and were punished because they were wrong, but, ultimately, they were forgiven because they were trying to fulfill the role of the Jew in the world. It is no good to erect barriers between ourselves and the world. What we have to do is enter the world. Of course, on the other hand, many Jews who are for Jewish continuity and for Jewish principles fail to realize that they have to give their children a good Jewish education otherwise Jews can never apply the essence of the Torah if they do not know it. One of the tragedies even in this city here is there are many Jews who will not send their children to a Jewish high school, to an orthodox school, but would rather send them to a Christian school where they even have to wear a cross on the uniforms. I do not understand these people at all because they are the same people who yell that we have to keep prayer out of the public schools and cannot have Christmas programs, even though the schools allow us to have Chanukah programs, and who yell at the Lubavitch for putting up a menorah, but, yet, they do not fight Christmas trees. It is very inconsistent and I do not understand it at all, but, yet, we have to accept that these people are still making good faith efforts even though they have lost the way. We have to redouble our efforts to bring them into the right way. So as long as Jews are trying to implement the Torah, even if they are misguided and even if they have to be called to account for what they are doing, yet, at the same time their efforts have to be applauded even when they are wrong. It is our hope and prayer that all Jews will come back to see the importance of Torah and that they will all try to apply it throughout life. We have to remember that this is the beginning of the process. There are going to be many ups and downs. It is also interesting to note that when the Jewish people brought the bikurim

they had to stay overnight. They could not just bring the bikurim and then go home. The rabbis ask why did they have to stay overnight? Because they had to realize that there is not just day but night. There is hardship as well as success. We had to take into account this hardship, but we should never give up hope. If we do our best we can rest assured that G-d will help us.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a young poor yeshiva boker who went to a very rich man and asked for the hand of his daughter in marriage. The rich man looked at the young man and said, "How do you expect to support my daughter in the style to which she has become accustomed?" The young man said, "G-d will help." The rich man then asked, "When you have children, how are you going to give them an education?" The young man said, "G-d will help." The rich man then asked him, "When you marry and have position in the community, how are you going to keep this position? How are you going to give to the charities that you have to and do the other things you have to do?" The young man said, "G-d will help." When he left the rich man looked at his friend and said, "You know, I really like that man." His friend asked why and he said, "Because he is the first man who ever thought that I was god." G-d has assured us that He will help us but we have to take the effort. We have to try our best. We have to remember that there are going to be ups and downs and we should never be discouraged, but that we should continue and even though some of our co-religionists take wrong paths we should still work with them and honor their efforts even though we are calling them to account because we know that ultimately the harvest will be brought in, that ultimately the Torah will be appreciated by all Jews and by the whole world so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.